

Dialogue

A Well with No Water

BRIJ V LAL

*The “Sea of Little Lands”: Examining Micronesia’s Place in
“Our Sea of Islands”*

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Ram, my best friend, is unwell. High blood pressure, failing kidneys, and rampant diabetes have all taken their toll on his health. “Not long to go, Bhai,” he said to me the other day, managing a characteristically resigned smile. He is living by himself, alone, in a one-bedroom rented apartment in Bureta Street, a working-class suburb of Suva. I visit him most evenings, have a bowl of grog, and talk long into the night about the old days. Both he and I know that the end is near, which makes each visit all the more poignant. As Ram often says, repeating the lines of Surendra’s immortal fifties’ song, “Hum bhor ke diye hain, bhujte hi ja rahe hain.” We are the dawn’s candle, slowly going out (one by one).

Ram and I go back a long way. We were fellow students at Labasa Secondary in the late sixties. He was easily the best history and literature student in the school. He knew earlier than anyone of us what *Lord of the Flies* and *Lord Jim* were about, the two books we were studying for the exams. I often sought his assistance with my English assignments, and helped him with geography, at which he was curiously hopeless. I still have with me the final-year autograph book in which he had written these lines: “When they hear not thy call, but cower mutely against the wall, O man of evil luck, walk alone.” *Ekla Chalo*, in Mahatma Gandhi’s famous words; Walk Alone.

We both went to university on scholarship to prepare for high-school teaching in English and history. I went on to an academic career while Ram, by far the brighter, was content to become and remain a high-school teacher. One day we talked about Malti. “I wonder where she is now?” I asked. “Married and migrated,” Ram said. “No contact?” “No. There was no point. It was all too late.” Ram and Malti were “an item” at school. Their developing love for each other was a secret we guarded zealously.

We had to. We knew that if they were caught, they would be expelled, just like that, no compassion, and no mercy. Labasa Secondary was not for romantics. It was a factory that prepared students for useful careers, and measured its self-esteem by the number of "A" graders it had in the external exams, and where it ranked in the colonial educational hierarchy with other notable secondary schools such as Marist Brothers, Suva Grammar, and Natabua High.

Malti failed her university entrance exam, and her cane-growing parents were too poor to support her at university. Jobs in Labasa were few, so Malti stayed at home. Ram was distraught, but there was little he could do but go to university. At the end of the first year, he received a sad letter from Malti telling him that she was getting married to an accountant at Morris Hedstrom. After all these years, Ram still had the letter, quoting lines he had once recited to her. "You will always be my light from heaven, a spark from an immortal fire." "Byron, did you know?" "I didn't. You are the poet, man. I am a mere garden-variety academic." Then Ram recited Wordsworth's poem "Lucy": "A violet by a mossy stone, / Half hidden from the eye." Such aching pain, endured through the years.

After completing university, Ram married Geeta. Both were teaching at Laucala Bay Secondary. Geeta came from a well-known Suva merchant family. She married Ram not out of love but convenience, I always thought, after her long love affair with a fellow teacher had come to an abrupt end. Ram was a good catch, a university graduate, well spoken, handsome, employed, and well regarded. Geeta was stylish, opinionated, and ambitious. But Ram was in no hurry to get anywhere soon. As long as he had his books and his music, he was happy. Whatever money he could spare, he would spend on books ordered from Whitcomb and Tombs in New Zealand and Angus Robertson in Sydney. He would have been among the most widely read men in Fiji, a far better student of poetry than some of the postmodern pretenders at the local university.

In 1984, Ram was transferred to Lamolamo Secondary. Geeta tried hard to persuade him to reject the offer. Her father interceded on their behalf with the Chief Education Officer (Secondary), but without success. Even a bottle of Black Label failed to get the desired result: teachers were in short supply and, worse, the new fellow, too earnest for his own good, seemed strangely impervious to importunities of any kind, including the *daru-murga* variety (dinner-drinks). Ram feigned disappointment to Geeta, but he was quietly pleased at the prospect of spending some time in the west, among country people whom he liked so much, away from

his intrusive in-laws, away from the soul-destroying, incestuous socials on the Suva teachers' cocktail circuit. He told Geeta that the transfer was just another step to better things and before they knew it, they would be back in Suva.

Lamolamo was a rural hinterland, smack in the middle of the dry cane belt of western Viti Levu. The living quarters at the school were spartan, water supply and electricity erratic, roads unpaved, food cooked on open fire, clothes washed by hand in the nearby river, drinking water fetched from the well. "Living hell" was how Geeta described her new home to her parents and friends in Suva. The slow rhythm of village life was well beyond her. The other teachers at the school were from western Viti Levu who spent their weekends with their relatives attending weddings and birthday parties, but Geeta had no close relations nearby, no one she could properly socialize with. No one quite measured up to her social standards. "Rurals" was how she contemptuously described the village people—rough, lacking in elementary social graces, plain. "Tan ko sahoor nahin haye. No manners whatsoever."

Ram reveled in the village environment, reliving the vanishing world of his rural childhood in Labasa. In no time, he had made friends in the village. He loved attending Ramayan recitals in the evenings and having a bowl of grog or two with the people at Sambhu's store. He did favors for the local people, filling out forms, writing letters to families who had migrated, giving advice about education. Ram was a regular and much-honored speaker at weddings and funerals. "Masterji aye gaye haye," people would say, "Master has arrived," sending shrieking school children into immediate respectful silence. "You should stand for election, Master," Kandasami suggested one day. "We will support you, no problem." A political career was furthest from Ram's mind, but he appreciated the invitation. "Retirement ke baad men dekhe khoi. We'll see after I retire." The topic kept returning.

Geeta resented Ram's after-school life and his growing popularity among the people who regarded Geeta, in the old-fashioned village way, simply as Ram's wife. The silence between the two was getting longer, more sustained, eye contact averted, conversation more and more strained. The physical intimacy of the early years was disappearing. "You have been stuck in this job all this time. Why don't you apply for promotion?" Geeta asked one day. She had in mind head of department, assistant principal, and then finally the top job at some decent suburban school near Suva. "But I love being in the classroom," Ram replied. "Geeta, you should

see the way the children's eyes light up when they finally get something. Today, we were reading 'The Snake.' Such a beautiful poem, don't you think? Lawrence gets the cadences, the nuances, the slithering subtleties." Ram usually spoke about literature in complete sentences, words carefully chosen. Poetry was the last thing on Geeta's mind.

All the nagging finally paid off. Ram accepted the headship of the Social Science Department. Soon afterward, all his horrors of headship materialized. One of his teachers was having an affair with the head girl. This had been going on for some time, but Ram, being Ram, was the last one to know. Charan Singh, the principal, was adamant: the offending teacher must go. "One rotten potato can ruin the whole sack," he said. "But where will he go? He will be finished for life. We can put a stop to all this. Just give me one chance," Ram pleaded. "Too late for that, Ram," Charan Singh replied with a firm tap of the finger on the desk, signaling the meeting was over. "He should have thought about his future beforehand, kept his trousers zipped." "Come on, it hasn't gone that far, Mr Singh," Ram reminded him. "Could have! Then what?" Reluctantly, Ram broke the news to Prem Kumar, who had just turned twenty-two. Ram was troubled for a long time. It's so unfair, he thought. One mistake, just one, and your life is finished. If I want power, he decided there and then, I will become a bloody politician.

"This is my kind of place, Geeta," Ram said when she asked him again to find a way out of this rural hellhole. "I am at peace here. Look at those mountains," he said, pointing to the craggy Nausori Highlands splitting Viti Levu in half. "The play of light on them at dusk. It's majestic. After this, who would want to be in Suva with all the rain and the dampness and the mosquitoes?" "But I will be closer to my parents." "That's what holidays are for, Geeta." "It is not good enough. You have your friends here. I have nobody." She had a point, Ram conceded.

Before Ram and Geeta could resolve their deepening impasse, Sitiveni Rabuka struck with his military coup. The school closed for a month. Ram and Geeta returned to Suva. There were unconfirmed reports of gangs of thugs terrorizing Indo-Fijian areas of the city. In Geeta's parents' house, there was turmoil. Once the talk was of promotion and transfer; now it was of migration. "Everyone is leaving. Just look at the long queues in front of the Australian and New Zealand embassies," Geeta's father said. Ram had seen the long lines, and been moved by the sight. "This place is finished. Khalas sab kuch. We Indians have no future here," Geeta's mother was adamant. "We have talked to Sudhir, and he has agreed to

sponsor you. We will come later.” Sudhir was Geeta’s older brother, living in Auckland.

Ram was torn. He knew he could not leave Fiji, but he had to think of Geeta, too. The faces of the villagers in Lamolamo also haunted him. Where will they go? he kept asking himself. “I can’t leave them now when they need me most,” he told Geeta one day. “That’s the problem with you, Ram,” Geeta replied sharply. “Everyone comes before me. Sab ke pahile, aapan ke sab roj baad men. I don’t know what magic the village people have done to you.” Time was of the essence. David Lange was quietly allowing Fiji people to enter New Zealand on generous visas. “We have to do something now before it is too late. Who knows when the doors will be shut?” “You go and I will follow later,” Ram said unconvincingly. “If that is what you want,” Geeta replied, knowing full well that Ram would be the last person to leave Fiji. They both knew in their hearts that their marriage was over.

Ram returned to Lamolamo as soon as the school reopened. People in the village peppered him with questions. A state of emergency was in force, the newspapers were censored, and radio news in Hindi was bland amid funereal music and sad songs. But in the countryside, Rumor Devi and Messers Fact and Fantasy were running wild. There were reports of people being picked up at night and interrogated at the military barracks, forced to walk with bare feet on scorching tar-sealed roads for miles, made to drink drain water, forced to crawl on rough pebbly ground, to masturbate in front of others.

One day in town, Ram picked up a copy of the *Fiji Voice*. The Sydney newssheet printed hard-hitting news that was censored in Fiji, especially news about the rampant abuse of human rights. Ram became a regular and avid reader, and related its troubling contents to the villagers at the shop in the evenings, to the slow shaking of heads in utter disbelief that such atrocities were taking place in Fiji: “Biswaas nahi hoye ki aisan cheez hiyan kabhi hoye sake,” people said. Sometimes, he used the school photocopier to make copies for people in neighboring villages. The more sensational abuses reported in the newsletter were translated into Hindi. People were confused, bewildered, and helpless.

“You are banging your head against a rock, Ram,” his colleague Satish remarked. “Don’t get me wrong, bro. I know the coup is wrong and all, but sometimes we have to accept reality, too.” “Yes, that’s what they all say,” Ram replied, irritated. “They all want us to commit political suicide. This reality thing is such a bloody cop-out, and you know it.”

"All that the Fijians want is to control the government, Ram," Satish said calmly. "That's all, and they will leave us alone." "Not at the point of the gun. No. An inch today, a foot tomorrow. Today they take our government away; tomorrow it will be our homes and businesses. We have to stop this cancer now before it destroys us all." "You are an idealist, Ram," Satish said. "*Unsudharable*. Unchangeable." "Better that than a neutral—or shall I say neutered—armchair realists like you folks, Satish." Ram remembered Gandhiji's words: "A 'No' uttered from deepest conviction is better and greater than a 'Yes' uttered to please, or what is worse, to avoid trouble."

"Remember, all the guns are on the other side," Satish continued. "Just look around, Ram, and tell me how many of these buggers will follow you into the battle: a handful, if that. Your problem, man, is that your head is always in the clouds, lost in lofty thoughts. Get real for once. E kuaan men pani nahi haye, bhaiywa. This well has no water, my friend." "It is easy sitting here in our cushy chairs with our monthly salaries and long holidays and pontificate," Ram said. "Well, that is not good enough for me." There were times when Ram felt like Sisyphus rolling his stone up the mountain, but there was nothing else he could do. The struggle had to go on.

The people of Lamolamo were incensed at what had happened, ready to erupt like an overheated furnace. The village was a close-knit community. It was known far and wide for its single-minded solidarity. This was also Labour heartland. For many, Mahendra Chaudhry, the Labour leader, was their guardian angel. They had waited for so long to be in government, only to be thrown out after a month. One day at Sambhu's shop, they decided to form a small committee to map strategy. "Ek dam kuch kare ke padi. We absolutely have to do something," all the villagers resolved. Ram Baran, the village *mukhia*, headman, was on it, along with Shafiq Ali, the owner of several lorries, Buta Singh, a large cane grower, and Chinnappa Naidu, the leader of the South Indians. Every cultural group was represented. Ram was invited to join. In fact, he was the one who had mooted the idea.

In the months following the coup, things went from bad to worse. Rabuka's belligerent Christian rhetoric compounded fears. His words on Radio Fiji sounded ominous. "I appeal to all Christian leaders to concentrate on evangelizing Hindus and Muslims," he thundered. That was the only way for permanent peace in Fiji, if everyone believed in the one God, Jehovah. Hindu and Muslim festivals might not be celebrated as national holidays.

Fijians must do what the Christian missionaries had done: convert heathens to Christianity. “I would be guilty in the face of God if I did not do that, if I did not use my office, my influence, to get the Church, those who believe in Lord Jesus Christ, to teach his love and what he stands for.”

Wild rumors spread in the village about forcible conversions, especially of children. Ram tried to calm fears. “It’s all talk, cheap talk,” he told people at the shop one evening. “The white missionaries tried this before during *girmit*, indenture. They failed. Think: if they did not succeed, will these fellows? Converting cannibals was one thing. Us? Never.” People nodded amid bowls of kava. “We are Sanatan Dharam, bhaiya. Koy khel-waar ke baat nahi haye,” said Bhola. “Eternal, without beginning or end, indestructible, nothing to trifle with. What will Christians give us that we don’t already have?” “*Patthar*, useless stones, rubble,” Ram Jiwan piped up from the back.

Within a week, talk of conversion had turned sinister. One night, the Shiv Mandir, the main village temple, was trashed and about \$25 in donations stolen, the prayer book burned, and idols smashed. The radio reported more desecrations of temples and mosques in Tavua and Rakiraki. “How low can these *kuttas*, dogs, go, Master?” Mahavir said to Ram. “What have our gods done to Fiji to deserve this?” He began sobbing. It had taken him and a few others a very long time to build the *mandir* from scratch, with hard-earned donations collected at Ramayan recitals. Now, all gone.

Ram was so angry he was ropeable. “No use crying, bro. We have to do something.” People looked in his direction as he spat out the words in embittered anger. “Like what?” “We should torch one of their bloody churches,” Piyare suggested. “Jaraao saale ke. I will do it myself.” “No,” Ram advised. “No, we should guard the *mandir* and our homes with physical force. We should form a group and take turns every night.” A vigilante group is what Ram had in mind. “They touch one finger, we chop off their hands. These people only understand violence. If they want to fight, we give them a fight.”

These were fighting words from a man of peace whose first love—preceding and leading to Malti—was English poetry. Something deep had stirred in Ram. The reports of daily humiliation, petty discrimination, the taunting and the threats, the steady drift of the community into the limbo between life and death, had had their effect. He was like a man possessed. “How dare these bastards do this to us!” he said to Satish one day. “Our forefathers built this place up with their bare hands. This is our home, too.

And they think they can take away our rights, just like that, and we would do nothing. Hell, no! Over my dead body!" "There will be many dead bodies before this evil saga is over, bro," Satish replied. "This is Kalyug, after all, remember. The cosmic Dark Age."

People were with Ram. Young men armed with polished mangrove sticks and sharpened cane knives patrolled the village. They protected the temple and would have beaten to a pulp anyone caught attempting desecration. Some of the young men described themselves as members of the Bajrang Dal, soldiers of Lord Hanuman, the brave monkey god. "Dekha jaai ka hoye. We are prepared for whatever happens," the young men said. Nothing happened for months. The attacks had been condemned by leading church leaders, even by Rabuka himself. The thugs had made their point, their anger subsided. People relaxed and went back to their old routine.

But just as one crisis was over, another emerged. The Sunday Ban came into force, banning all sports and work on the Sabbath. There was no public transport on Sunday. You couldn't bury the dead, wash clothes in the open, organize weddings or social gatherings without official permission. Opinion was divided. For Ram, as always, it was a matter of principle. "No one has the right to tell me when to rest. And since when has Sunday become our day of rest? If we don't harvest on Sunday, what happens when the wet weather starts?" "The mills won't operate after December," Suruj Bali said. "Forget about harvesting, *yaar*, pal," Bhola chimed in. "We won't have taxis on the roads, no buses, nothing. What if we have to go to the hospital?" "Once again, we poor people get caught in the middle," someone added. "Phir garib log ke upar sala museebat aaye." But some of the casual laborers, who usually kept quiet, actually welcomed a rest on Sunday. They had nothing to lose.

One day, Bansi organized a large, ten-day Bhagvata Katha at his place to mark the first anniversary of his father's death. The entire village was invited. It was not an act of defiance, though Ram thought it was. It was thought that such a harmless religious activity would be of no interest to the authorities. They were wrong. Late on the second day, a truckload of soldiers arrived. After making enquiries, they took Bansi and his eldest son, Jamuna, away. Both returned home late in the evening in a hired cab, their bodies bloodied and bruised, lips swollen from punches, pants soiled. "Next time we catch you," the soldiers had warned them, "you will find yourself in a morgue."

How did the military find out what was happening at Bansi's house?

Ram wondered. Obviously, there were spies among them. But who? Ram suspected Jumsa, an excessively deferential unemployed young man, who attended all the meetings, listened intently to everything, but never said a word. Often he volunteered for anything the village committee decided. But there was no proof. Only much later it was revealed that Ram Baran, whose spy Jumsa was, had quarreled with Bansi over a land boundary and lost the court case. This was his opportunity to take revenge and gain favor with the military chief for western Viti Levu, Aisake Mualevu. This respected leader of the village, the chairman of the village coup committee, was also the military's eyes and ears in the settlement. A sheep without, a wolf within. Haraamzada. The labyrinths of betrayal and deceit ran deep in the roots of our community. Joseph Addison's words from *Cato* were apt: "Is there not some chosen curse, / Some hidden thunder in the stores of heav'n, / Red with uncommon wrath, to blast the man, / Who owes his greatness to his country's ruin?"

With no signs in Suva of the crisis resolving, talk increased of putting more pressure on the military regime. The leaders decided that there should be a boycott of the cane harvest. "We must bring this illegal regime to its knees," one of them said. "Why should we pay these bastards to put their boots into us? When we ask for sanctions from overseas, we must be prepared to pay a price ourselves. Sacrifice begins at home." "We broke the CSR's back with our strikes," someone said, referring to the Colonial Sugar Refining Company. "What is this?" "Saalan ke nas maar de khoi. We will teach the bastards a lesson." Brave talk of defiance and determination began circulating in the village. Ram was quietly pleased. His occasional doubts about their resolve began to dissolve.

A meeting of the village committee was convened to firm things up. The usual arguments in favor of a harvest boycott were rehearsed. Ram took the minutes. Buta Singh, the biggest cane farmer in the village, who had remained quiet throughout the meeting, spoke after everyone else had finished. "Why is it that whenever there is any problem, the farmers are the first ones to be asked to make sacrifices? No one comes to help us when there is a drought or a flood or hurricane or fire." All eyes were on him. "Will the trade union *babus* making so much noise now sacrifice a single cent from their salaries? Will the big businesses, which suck our blood, close their shops for even one day? Will they? Then why ask us to be the first ones to be in the frontline? Kahe khaali hum kisan log ke sab se aage pahile bheja jaaye haye?"

"We are frogs in a small pond," Ram Samujh responded after a long,

stunned silence following Buta's blunt words. "Our leaders will never ask us to make sacrifice unless there is no other way. They are one of us. Hamai log ke admi to haye. We have complete faith in them. Cent per cent." "Buta," Shiu Ram said sharply, "you are worried about saving your pennies when the whole country is going to the dogs. All these nice buildings, nice farms, tractors: what's the use having them when we have no rights in this country? Fighting this evil regime must be the first priority of every Indian in this country." "Think back, front, right, and left, before you decide. Aage, peeche, daayen, baayen, dekh ke bichaar aur faisala karna," Buta Singh said as he left the meeting. In the end, the meeting decided to boycott.

Buta Singh had made sense, Ram thought, and said as much. "We must bring this illegal regime down," he told the meeting, "but everyone should shoulder his share of the burden." He himself was prepared to sacrifice part of his salary for the cause. "There should be a national strategy for a national boycott. Traitors should know what will happen to them. We will boycott their shops." "Burn them down," someone said. "Yes, if we have to." "Talk is cheap, Master," Raghu said. "We need action now." Then, "What have *you* got to lose? Here today, somewhere else tomorrow, like a bird. Aaj hiyan, kal huaan. Ek chirai ke rakam." That was a cruel cut: for Ram, there was no other place he would rather be, but he did not say anything.

Ram was genuinely distraught to learn the next morning that a large part of Buta Singh's cane farm had been burned down. It was a clear case of arson, punishment for speaking his mind. Ram was amazed at the technique the arsonists had used to avoid being detected. They had tied kerosene-soaked cloth around the tails of a dozen mongooses, lit them, and set them loose in the cane field. The terrified animals ran for their lives in every which direction, leaving behind a trail of burning, tinder-dry cane leaves, making it difficult to put the fires out. The village was split down the middle. Ram thought to himself, Here we're fighting for our democratic rights, and this is what we do to a man who had the courage to speak his mind? We must rid ourselves of what we condemn.

A week or two after Buta Singh's cane was destroyed, a couple of government caterpillar bulldozers arrived to upgrade the village road. That surprised everyone: why *their* village, why now? Who had approached the government? That evening, all was revealed at the shop. Shafiq Ali, the Muslim owner of trucks, had asked the public works minister, through a well-connected relative, to see if the badly potholed and, at places, eroded

road could be repaired for a little something. What that “little something” was, no one knew, but gifts up to five hundred dollars for these sorts of favors were not rare. No one could do much to Shafiq. They needed his lorry to carry cane. There was no point thinking of ostracizing him: Hindus and Muslims had always kept social interaction to the minimum anyway. And Shafiq was more attuned to what leaders of the Fiji Muslim League were saying. “Keep quiet and work with the Fijians. This is not our fight.”

Ram was saddened at the religious rift. Although Muslims and Hindus in the village were not socially close, relations were still cordial. But ever since a Muslim delegation had told the Great Council of Chiefs that they accepted the coup and would support Fijian aspirations in return for four separate Muslim seats, relations had soured. A local Muslim academic had even said that, as far as he was concerned, Muslims and Christians were “people of The Book,” and Hindus were not. His own grandmother had been a Hindu converted to Islam. “What has religion got to do with the price of *aloo* and *piyaj*, potatoes and onions?” Ram had asked. “Do these arseholes know the damage they are doing to our people here? These bloody city slickers are lighting a fire they won’t be able to put out.”

Once or twice, Ram thought of talking to Shafiq, but the damage had already been done. And Shafiq had said so many times before, “Jamaat ke baat kaatna haraam haye. It is a sin to disobey your community.” When Shafiq’s wife died a few months later, not a single Hindu attended the funeral, except Ram. But Shafiq did not escape completely unscathed. For a long time, he was mystified why his cane-carrying lorries had so many punctured tires. The reason, ingenious when you thought about it, was that people hammered nails into dozens of stalks of cane and scattered them randomly on roads used by the lorries. They lay unnoticed among all the other cane stalks that had fallen from trucks and were being flattened into cane carpets on the cane belt roads.

One day, Chinappa Naidu told a meeting at the shop that Fijians were very agitated, in a vengeful mood. “Maango, maango, nahi maango, jao. Want, want, don’t want, go.” “If you want the lease on our terms, fine,” they were saying, “but if not, leave.” Their demand was clear: One thousand dollar goodwill payment upfront, and no opposition to the coup. “Fiji hum log ke jamin baitho. Hum hiyan ke raja hai. Fiji is our land. We are the kings of this place.” There was nowhere Chinappa and other evicted tenants could go. “Vulagi can’t be Taukei. Sa sega sara. Immigrants can’t be Natives. Never,” was the common refrain. It was the same

everywhere in Viti Levu, this talk of vengeance and retribution and expulsion. “Where will I take my family?” Chinappa asked. “Kahan laye jaaib sab ke?” He had three children in high school, with a daughter about to be married. The ten-acre plot of leased land was all he had, the sole source of livelihood for the family. Everyone sympathized with Chinappa, because they knew that their turn would come one day, sooner rather than later. What Ram had feared most was taking place right before his eyes. His dream of uniting the village and stiffening its spine was dissolving almost even before it had begun. Shakespeare’s lines from *Henry VI* echoed in his mind: “So bees with smoke and doves with noisome stench, / Are from their hives and houses driven away.”

The worst victims of the coup without doubt were the young people in the village. Of those who had passed their exams with good marks, a handful had gone on to Form 7, and some even to the university and the local technical institute, but many had failed. Their fate was sealed. “My heart broke,” Ram said to me, “to see these kids from simple homes, decent, well behaved, wanting to make something of their lives, but with nothing to do, nowhere to go, victims of blatant racism.” A lost generation, I thought to myself. Promising young lives cut short so early. Ram had found a few of the brighter boys jobs as part-time tutors for the children of businesspeople in town, while some eventually found employment as taxi and bus drivers. That was all he could do. Still, they remembered him with gratitude and affection, like a kind younger uncle, still calling him “sir” whenever they ran into him.

A few of the girls found employment in one of the tax-free textile factories that had sprung up after the coups. Thirteen-year tax holidays and other concessions had attracted a few foreign companies. The government wanted to kick-start the economy by whatever means it could. This seemed an easy and promising option. The government turned a blind eye to the working conditions in the factories. Most women working in them were single mothers from broken homes, widows, young unemployed girls just out of school.

One day, Ram received a visit from one of his former students, Kiran. She was working at a garment factory in Lautoka. Ram already had a reputation as a teacher to whom students confided their problems. “Sir, you must do something about this. How long will these atrocities go on? Kuch karana padi, sir, kab tak aise atyachaar chalte rahi,” she said handing him a blue manila folder full of loose handwritten sheets. He promised to read the file that night and get back to her.

What he read in the files enraged him, handwritten evidence of example upon example of utter merciless exploitation of women. There was the case of Sheela Kumari, divorced, who worked for a garment manufacturer on probation for six weeks. All she got paid was her bus fares of two dollars, and no pay for the work she had done producing the garments. Then there was Uniasi Marama, in the packing department, who had worked in the factory for fourteen years and she still earned only 72 cents an hour. “It takes this lady fourteen years to earn 72 cents an hour. She was fourteen years only when she started work,” Kiran said. Meresimani Tinai’s and Senata Tinai’s pay rates were 50 and 55 cents respectively. Ameila Sukutai did ironing and packing but was paid only 50 cents an hour. “You can see on this one, sir,” Kiran said, “that she is performing two jobs but is being paid only for one.” None of the workers got overtime even though many worked beyond their normal working hours.

Shobna Singh was brave enough to have her experience written down. Ram read the report aloud. “Work starts on the dot at 8 AM. After that, no one is allowed to even look around. The neck stiffens, eyes water and burn, and a headache starts, nose gets blocked with cotton dust, and back and legs begin to ache. The machines themselves are not in proper working condition, yet any delays are blamed on the worker. Hard chairs and poor ventilation add to the discomfort. Few minutes late starting means a deduction in the wage. There is no such thing as sick leave pay. No overtime paid. No benefits for long-term service. No insurance to cover any health hazard that may confront a worker while at work. No leave or leave pay. No emergency exits or drills to deal with emergencies. No fire extinguishers in sight. At break, nobody is allowed to leave a second early. Morning break from 10–10:15 AM: no one is allowed outside the premises. Lunch break is limited to 30 minutes, 12 noon–12:30. And at 3 PM there is a 15-minute break when nobody is allowed out again. An hour’s break in all that eight hours of work. No calls are passed on or calls allowed to be made. No one is allowed visitors. In a caged atmosphere workers are urged to work faster and faster.”

Ram asked Kiran to arrange a meeting with one of the workers to get a better feel of the situation. Kiran fetched Anshu. They met at Ram’s quarters late on Sunday. Anshu related an incident involving her at the factory the previous day. “During lunch hour I had gone to the toilet when the alarm bell rang. As soon as I came out, the security guard came and said to me, ‘What are you doing inside the toilet?’ I said, ‘Don’t you know what a lady does in a toilet?’ He said, ‘Don’t talk cheeky, you just go in.’” Anshu

then went to her desk. As she was punching time off at the end of the day, the security guard came up to her and asked, "What is in the plastic bag?" "I said, 'Apples and milk.'" The guard grabbed the plastic bag and tore it to look inside. Then he threw the bag and its contents outside the gate. A hard-earned \$6.59 cents worth of food destroyed. Then he swore at her, "Fuck off, you bastard, take your plastic and go," he said, threatening to punch her. Anshu was saved from assault by a Fijian security guard who picked up the apples and milk and put them inside the plastic bag, apologetically.

"You must do something about it, sir." Kiran's words kept reverberating in Ram's head. But what? How? Ram began by compiling a list of abuses and transgressions as accurately as he could. With Kiran's assistance, he would meet the garment workers late in the evenings, during weekends, taking care not to be seen in public with his informants. He tracked down Shobna Singh and talked to her at length. Over the next month, Ram compiled a detailed report on the working conditions in the garment factories in the Lautoka area.

Ram then traveled to Suva to give the report to Ema Fulavesi, the trade union activist. Ema was a roly-poly woman with a passion for her cause. "This is dynamite, Bhaiya, ek dam julum," she told him, "very good indeed, brother. We have the buggers by the balls. Magai Chinamu. Sorry, Bhaiya, don't mind my language. Big catch, this one! Blerry bastards." Several months later, Ram received in the mail a small, printed paper containing the news of a demonstration in Sydney against the garment industries in Fiji. The demonstration was against the Fijian Garments Exhibit Apparel Expo at Darling Harbour, outside Hall 5, Sydney Exhibition Centre.

It was organized by the Clothing Trades Union, at the request of the Fiji Trade Union Congress. The leaflet announcing the demonstration read: "The garments being promoted are made in Tax-Free Zones by workers earning as little as 50 cents an hour in sweatshop conditions. Many of the companies are Australia and New Zealand employers who have moved part or all of their operations to Fiji to avoid labor laws and trade unions. A Garment Workers Union has just been registered in Fiji after a long struggle. But workers are still denied a living wage. And some workers caught organizing for the Union have been victimized, dismissed, and even physically assaulted."

The garment industry was furious. How had such damaging inside information gone public? A hunt was on for a mole in the factory, but no one suspected Kiran. She was always quiet and outwardly obedient and

punctual, always calling her boss “sir,” averting her gaze, getting along with everyone. But again, it was Jumsa who spilled the beans. He had kept a close eye on where Ram went and who he talked to, and reported it to Ram Baran, his uncle. It did not take Ram Baran long to put two and two together.

One day while Ram was teaching his class on “Literature and Society,” the principal came around and told him that Ram Baran, the chairman of the School Management Committee, wanted to meet him urgently. “I will complete the class for you,” he said. Judging by the urgency in his voice, Ram knew something was awry. He walked towards the committee room with words from an Auden poem ringing in his ears. “The sky is darkening like a stain, / Something is going to fall like rain, / And it won’t be flowers.”

“Masterji, we should talk,” Ram Baran said, beginning the proceedings. “About what?” Ram enquired cautiously. “Oh, small things, big things, about you and the school.” That all seemed mysterious to Ram. He waited for Ram Baran to continue. “People have been talking, Master,” he said. Ram looked at him straight in the eye, waiting for him to continue. “About you and the girl.” “What girl? What are you talking about?” “Master, you know the girl, the one who works at the garment factory.” “You mean Kiran?” “Yes.” “What about her? She was my student once and she now works at the garment factory.” “You two have been seen together at odd hours and strange places. Jamin ke pas bhi kaan aur ankhi haye. Even the land has ears and eyes.” “So?” “We have the reputation of the school to think of. When married teachers have affairs with their former students, it does not look good, Master.”

Ram was stumped for words. His marriage had been over a long time ago. Geeta was seeing someone else. It was an amicable separation. The two were not meant for each other, they both knew, and always deep in Ram’s heart, there was Malti. But Ram had not seen any point in publicizing his divorce. His close friends knew but made little of it. Marriage failures were common enough; Ram’s was no exception. Ram had not been having affairs, certainly not when there had been so much else to do. To be accused of having an affair with Kiran, attractive though she was, was simply preposterous.

“Kaka, Uncle, let me say this once and once only. I am not having an affair with Kiran or anyone else. Kiran and I have been working on a research project.” He then described the data the two were collecting on the working conditions in the garment factories. “So it was you, then,”

Ram Baran said, “who gave all that dirt to the trade unions.” “Kaka,” Ram replied firmly, “you should see things for yourself. It’s worse than what you can imagine.” He went on to talk about women having to get permission to go to the toilet, male guards posted outside the women’s toilet, the musty, filthy conditions inside, the sexual advances, the threat of violence. “And to think that this is our own people doing it! Here we are fighting this coup regime, and look at what these bastards are up to. Kitna gira jaat haye hum log. What a low-down people we are.” Ram Baran said nothing.

The following week, the Management Board convened. It had been a busy week for Ram Baran. Jason Garments had contributed to the refurbishing of the school library and he was keen to make sure that future funds did not dry up. What better way to ensure that than to ingratiate yourself with the factory owner? Ram Baran told Ravin Dhupelia, the owner, what Ram had been up to, the damage he had done. “Get rid of him now, Ram Baran. Now. Get rid of that rotten egg. That arsehole of a bastard. *Sala, Chutia, Gaandu*. How dare he bite the hand that feeds him?” “Leave that to me, boss,” Ram Baran said as he left Duphelia’s office. He then contacted all the members of the Management Board, one by one, and told them about Ram and how his immediate firing was necessary to ensure further funding from Jason Garments and other business houses in town.

At the meeting attended by the full Management Board, Ram Baran spoke at length and on behalf of everyone. “Master, we are not satisfied with your performance. You seem to be more interested in politics than teaching these days.” “That’s not true,” Ram said. He hadn’t missed a single day of class. And wasn’t it true that the highest number of “A” grade passes in Fiji Junior were from his class? Ram Baran ignored him and proceeded with his rehearsed speech, reminding Ram of everything he had done and said since the coup: organizing the village committee, using the school printing machines to circulate newsletters, putting strange ideas about dignity and self-respect into the heads of children, and now this: rocking the garment industry. “You are risking the future of our children. Do you know how many girls from this school the garment factories employ?” Many, Ram knew, but at what cost? “We don’t want to kill the goose that lays the golden egg,” Ram Baran said. Some golden egg, Ram thought to himself. “We have reached the decision and—it is unanimous, if you must to know—you should leave the school immediately. Baat aage tak pahunch gaye haye. We have already informed the Education Depart-

ment.” The Roman playwright Plautus said it: “Your tongues and talk are steeped in honey and milk / your doings and dispositions are steeped in gall and sour vinegar.”

“I thought of many things to say,” Ram said to me, “but there was no point. Their minds were already made up. There was no point confusing them with facts. I packed up and left.” Not a single person on the board spoke up for him; no one in the village came to farewell him. That saddened me immensely. This most idealistic of men, with a brave heart and noble vision, having to suffer this kind of petty humiliation, and that too from his own people. All that selfless work, standing up against the coup, organizing people, helping the victims of the garment industry, writing letters to the papers, had in the end come to naught, undone by duplicity and deviousness and by his high principles clashing with a rotten world gone strangely awry. Ram remembered Byron’s *Childe Harold*: “Love, fame, ambition, avarice—’tis the same, / Each idle, all ill, and none the worst—/ For all are meteors with a different name, / And death the sable smoke where vanishes the flame.”

Ram returned to Suva. His heart had gone out of teaching. Nor did he want to pursue further studies at the local university. He had no desire for a new career nor, to be perfectly honest, was he much impressed by the quality of what was on offer. He took up a job as a part-time sales representative at a hardware store in Samabula, and spent the rest of his time by himself, reading, alone, in his musty, dingy, book-strewn, rented flat in Bureta Street, a battered man, living in flickering hope. Battered, but unbroken. He wrote furiously in his diary about the rotten world about him, about lost hope and missed opportunities. That was his way of coping. He wondered how things could have gone so wrong, how his own people were dishonoring their heritage of struggle and sacrifice. Questions and more questions, but now for someone else to answer. Ram knew that his end was near. I felt his pain and anguish.

Last night when I visited him, reminiscing as usual about our distant youthful days, he sang a Talat Mehmood song:

Phir wahi shaam, wahi gham, wahi tanhaai hai
Dil ko samjhaane teri yaad chali aayi hai

Once again that evening, that sadness, that anguish.
Your memories have returned to soothe my heart.